INTRODUCTION

The following journalists were awarded media fellowships by FOCAL in 1997:

- **Wivina Belmonte**, senior producer and London bureau chief with CBC TV News, investigated how former enemies in El Salvador’s 12-year civil war are now jointly negotiating the business of government as the country’s democratization process continues.
- **Cori Howard**, associate producer with CBC Newsworld’s Pacific Rim Report and freelance print journalist, studied how former Chilean exiles, having returned home and now working in government, media, and the business community, have come to terms with their country’s past and influenced its institutions.
- **Carl Neustaedter**, director of design for *The Ottawa Citizen*, investigated how Guatemalans, following three decades of civil war and facing continued violence in daily life, view justice—in institutional, interpersonal and economic contexts—since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996.
- **David Swick**, columnist for the *Halifax Daily News*, travelled to Cuba to study the role of various religious faiths in private and public life in that country.
- **Guy Taillefer**, deputy news editor for *Le Devoir* in Montreal, investigated the social and economic changes in Nicaragua that have taken place since the defeat of the Sandinista government in 1990 as demonstrated by the growing numbers of child labourers.

FOCAL is pleased to present their report. It must be pointed out that these reports were not written for publication, and that is part of their appeal. As different from one another as the topics covered, they are first person accounts of how the media fellows approached their research, and what they discovered. All offer glimpses of our hemispheric partners not normally found in Canadian media. Windows on Latin America, they also reveal much about the practice of journalism.

Launched in 1994, FOCAL’s Media Fellowship Program enables experienced Canadian journalists, editors, and producers in print and electronic media to spend a two-month “sabbatical” in a country of Latin America or the Caribbean to carry out a program of individual research. The fellowships provide a cash award and return, economy-fare transportation to the country of tenure. The fellowships are made possible thanks to the support of the Canadian International Development Agency.
El Salvador in Transition

by Wivina Belmonte

On January 16th, Salvadoran President Armando Calderon Sol celebrated the sixth anniversary of the signing of El Salvador's peace accords by hosting a glittering ceremony in the capital's Chancellery where he launched something called *el segundo esfuerzo* (the second push). Under the official title of *Bases para el plan de la nacion* it is, in effect, his own personal initiative to promote a dialogue among a cross-section of Salvadoran society. The expressed aim of this effort is to establish a national consensus, the first of its kind in El Salvador, describing the kind of values Salvadorans want to promote and the kind of country Salvadorans want to create.

Two weeks later, on January 31st, another initiative was launched. This too was of a personal nature, but with an altogether different purpose. The families of those who had been killed during El Salvador's long and bloody civil war, and indeed the families of those still missing, gathered in San Salvador's Parque Cuscutlan to unveil a plaque in the memory of those they'd lost. This too was the first effort of its kind, the first public acknowledgement of the horrors that still haunt so many Salvadorans.

These two events encapsulate two themes that ran through many of my discussions and experiences over the cause of my time in El Salvador. One represents the official view of the transition the country has undergone and continues to undergo. The other, the pain still suffered by so many, struggling to come to grips with the past. One represents an eye to the future, the other an effort at coming to some peace with the past. One symbolizes the official vision, the other the grassroots vision. Both speak to the mindset held by each constituency as El Salvador's transition unfolds.

The nature of my own vision of what I was researching evolved along these very lines. My initial proposal dealt primarily with the political transition of this tiny Central American country. It was to focus on how the transition in the ruling elite had unfolded since those bloody civil war years. How did individuals go from warrior to peacemaker to politician in one lifetime? And, how did they make the leap from dealing with their enemies at gunpoint, to dealing with them across the floor of a national assembly.

The answers to some of those questions surprised me. Most probably because the political transition, by all accounts, has unfolded and is unfolding rather smoothly. The more precarious transition, however, deals with a whole section of people who remain, essentially, ignored. The great majority of El Salvador's six million people are finding their transition achingly difficult. Indeed, it was not altogether uncommon to hear people say they were better off during the war. It was even more surprising to hear them say they were better off before the war - surprising, since the country's pre-war political and economic conditions were the very root causes of the 12-year civil war. To exclude those voices within this paper would have meant marginalizing the majority and thereby mirroring the very dichotomy that seems to exist in El Salvador today.
Over the course of my stay, I was fortunate enough to meet a wide variety of people and gather a range of testimonials about the scope of the transition this fascinating country has, and has not, undergone. I am particularly grateful to everyone at the Centre for International Solidarity who helped with my initial orientation in and around San Salvador... and patiently put up with my e-mail addiction during my stay. A personal word of thanks to the family of Anna Maria and Oscar Palomo, who graciously opened up their home to a stranger. Their kindness and generosity made me feel more than welcome, they made me feel like part of the family. Gracias.

El Salvador has indeed undergone seismic political change in the few short years since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. A country dominated by right-wing politicians is on the cusp of another sea-change. Having won key municipal elections in 1997, the left is well poised to win the presidency in March 1999. Given El Salvador's recent history, this is a stunning possibility. It was not so long ago that the left was considered Latin America's "most professional guerrilla force"1. But it has become a legitimate political force and is now standing expectedly at the footsteps of the presidency. Less than a decade ago, the idea of the FMLN (the leftist Farabundo Marti Liberation Front) holding the reins of national power would have sparked fears of military intervention. The fact no such threat exists today speaks to an evolution in the FMLN, in the country and in the right also.

"In El Salvador, we have an historic opportunity to deepen the changes we have undergone the democratization of the political system and the economic changes."

To know the man who spoke those words is to start to get a sense of the extent of real political change in El Salvador and to get a window on the current political debate as the country heads into its next round of Presidential elections. Meet Facundo Guardado the new director of the FMLN, the chief of the FMLN's electoral campaign in 1997 and formerly the chief commander of guerrilla forces in Chalatenango province. Known then for his strategic military savvy he is now a key architect of the FMLN's political strategy. Guardado's political acumen is clear as he casts an eye to the second Presidential elections to be held since the peace accords were signed, and as he shrewdly calculates the stakes in the political battle ahead:

"It is historic because if ARENA (the country's ruling right-wing party) were to win again, it would mean this generation would have a very small role to play in any real change. There would be opportunities for change, but not for my generation. So, what we need to win in 1999 is clear- it comes down to this, we need another 300- thousand votes."

Guardado presents himself as very much the social democrat of the 1990s. Abandoning the Marxist rhetoric typical of the FMLN's traditional philosophical roots, he describes today's FMLN-style socialism as inextricably linked to democracy:

"For me socialism is democracy. And by democracy I mean more than elections, more than the democratization of the political system, I mean a system that gives people a fuller sense of well-being and a system that promotes human dignity. We have made important progress on the

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1 "The left rises"  The Economist March 22nd, 1997 p.78
democratization of our political processes. That's undeniable. But it hasn't been accompanied by a generally higher standard of life for the majority. We have a huge socio-economic challenge. Made all the more so because our productive base is deterioration - a process which is hard to reverse. At least 50% of the population is excluded, because it creates two societies: one which is part of the system and the other that feels completely excluded from it."

In fact the sense of exclusion runs so deep that there are some people who fought on the FMLN side, and have since quit, because they see El Salvador's political elite - left and right - as having been co-opted. Benjamin Cuellar, head of the institute for human rights at the UCA (Universidad Centroamerica), says people feel marginalized because they feel like neither part of the system nor even part of the peace:

"For there to be real change, people have to be a part of it. And they aren't. People wonder what it is they really fought for. People fought to push ahead, to push beyond social exclusion, they look around and wonder what's really changed. There is still no agrarian reform here. So, they went from the battlefield into debt. What are they supposed to think. They feel betrayed. The peace accords have their roots in New York City. It wasn't even discussed in this country. No one ever had the idea that signing this thing in this country might make people feel like it was their peace. It was never really transplanted here. And it's roots have simply not taken hold. There is still no economic justice. No judicial justice. No social justice. There is no peace here. There is only an absence of war."

It is a dark vision. One whose hopelessness is refuted by those still actively involved in the political process. Dr. Ruben Zamora is a political institution in El Salvador -- a politically active voice in that country for the past thirty-years and still alive to talk about it. He was the left's candidate for President in 1994.

"Look, this is a didactic argument. If there is no war, then of course there must be some kind of peace. But where I do agree would be to say a full peace does not exist. This country went to war because mort people felt excluded from any real kind of participation in their own country's social and economic systems. The peace accords addressed a sense of exclusion from politics, but not from those critical social and economic sectors. In other words, politics and economics are like two locomotives that are heading on the same track but in opposite directions. The prognosis? The political window of opportunity gets stretched so thin, you lose it. It cannot remain open without it taking on board those other questions. Which is also why this document (the national plan) is so important. This effort has good chances, but little time. Even so, I think our society is more prepared to do it now, than it was five years ago."

If there is any single person who might feel he has a particular stake in this segundo esfuerzo, indeed in the transition of El Salvador, it is David Escobar Galindo. He is one of the six architects of the plan, hand-picked by President Calderon, and also the man who represented then President Cristiani around the peace talks table. Poet, columnist, and university rector, he regards this new phase of El Salvador's development as crucial. He is not surprised by the pessimism expressed by those who remain disappointed and feel betrayed, but he believes that for the country to mature it must take part in this segundo esfuerzo.
"I don't think pessimism has ever led to anything," he says. "Now, there are many pessimists in El Salvador because we are in a process of change. What we need to do is to apply a kind of reverse domino theory. Have one person stand up and start a kind of chain reaction that gets others to stand also. But none of this is comfortable or easy. That scares people and creates pessimism."

Galindo is regarded, by many on the left, as the voice of reason on the right. His position of privilege, coming from one of El Salvador's ruling families, helped cast him into the role of peacemaker during the time of the peace accords. It's not that the transition was easy, he says, it's that it's time had come:

"The war was prolonged, intense and once it was no longer possible to conclude it through violent means, the opportunity for a negotiated peace appeared. We were, in a way, condemned to democracy, for lack of a coup de grace on the battlefield. And it's the best thing that could have happened to us. The way the peace was negotiated paved the way for the future. Without it, we'd still be in an interminable debate over who killed, or who did what to, whom. The political solution deactivated much of the violence by marginalizing the military. And forcing the FMLN to become a political rather than paramilitary force."

But in El Salvador the seeds of pessimism belong to the ghosts of the past and feed off the fears of the present. Away from the corridors of power, and the important but sterile discussions over the country's future, the two major concerns are improving the standard of living and the issue of personal safety. The civil war cost 75-thousand lives. Yet, today, the murder rate in the capital is worse than it was at the height of the war. Too many guns, too many gangs, too many broken families, too few jobs and too little hope. The socio-economic transition is not keeping pace. In some sectors that transition is barely happening at all.

Social disparity in the capital can be measured in the lengths of a few city blocks. Straddling the exclusive areas of San Benito and Colonia Escalon is the nice part of town. There are art galleries, internet cafes, shopping malls and the usual assortment of fast food restaurants you'd see in any Canadian city. It's not as though you'd bump into anyone strolling around there, though. Nobody walks here. It's considered too dangerous. The police who patrol on bicycles look ridiculously out of place. The residents who do venture from their homes - drive. Emerging from behind their security gates and barbed-wired walls they stick to the security of their cars. I met people who had not left the area in five years!

Within three city blocks is another world. Here you'll find cramped colonies of shacks made of corrugated tin and mud, where venturing out after 8 p.m is considered hazardous, if not lethal. Here, a siege mentality prevails, Eye contact is avoided. Store shops are caged in - to avoid human contact and armed hold-ups. Street vendors sell velcro gun holsters for a dollar outside the unlicensed gun shops around the capital. Nightly curfews stopped being the policy long ago - but they remain the practice, with people fearfully choosing not to stay out at night.

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2 Customers receive their goods through a hole, the size of a shoebox, through the grill.
At lunch one day the topic turned, as it so often does, to the issue of *maras* (gangs) and delinquency. Every single person, at the table of eight, had a story about how they had been robbed. One of them - in church! It was an amazing tale. The woman explained how a man, sporting the traditional rural machete on his hip, sat next to her. Calmly, he pointed to the machete while asking her for her purse. It being a Sunday, the woman had uncharacteristically left home wearing a bit of jewelry. She was relieved of that too. But as she handed over her purse, she asked the robber if he would return a photograph she had in it of her son, disappeared since 1981. He did. And left. I couldn't help but reflect that in El Salvador, even thieves are softened by the memory of a collective social trauma.

The woman in church was Anna Maria Palomo. Fifty years old, a woman of great conviction, courage and much pain. For her, the war will never be over. Every day she lives with the mystery of what happened to her eldest son, Walberto, who disappeared at the age of 16. As hopeless as it may seem, she refuses to give up her search:

"I looked everywhere for my son. You wouldn't believe what I did. Up, down, across the whole of El Salvador. In San Salvador, I walked and walked and walked. I searched street after street. Back then the streets were littered with corpses, or pieces of them. Sometimes just heads, or arms. I tell you this, and it fells like it was someone else who lived that another life, an awful nightmare. But that's the way it was. And we just had to live with it and survive."

Anna Maria's single purpose now in life is to care for her two grandchildren and to find her son. While she is, and has always been, a staunch FMLN supporter who would love to see the FMLN in power, she fatalistically believes that things are worse now than during the war and aren't likely to get better. The main problem, in her eyes, is the crime rate. For Anna Maria the transition still represents a struggle to survive.

The *maras*, responsible for so much of the violence, are considered a scourge. They are regarded as thugs, or as byproduct of society numbed by appalling levels of violence and family breakdown. German, now 22 years old, grew up on his own through the war years. He joined a gang at age nine and only recently quit. As he talks about his life, he rolls up the sleeves of his t-shirt and unveils a tattoo on his right arm.

"My mum left me when I was five," he says. "My father disappeared before that. I stayed with my grandparents. When I was seven, my grandmother sent me to the street selling *tamales* (minced and seasoned meat packed in cornmeal dough, wrapped in corn husks and steamed). I pretty much started working then and learned how to fend for myself. I got into trouble early. Hit my teacher when I was nine. Got hooked into a gang and involved in selling drugs, pills, pot, glue. At dances there would be other groups, recruiting. Things got heavy then. We started robbing, killing, buying women and going after other gangs."

Having served time for killing a man, he now focuses on his life with his girlfriend who is expecting their first child. He helps run a self-funded NGO, called Homeboyz, involved in washing cars and other odd jobs. He blames the war for part of what happened to him, but he talks about the lack of opportunity today, too. He accuses the government of failing to give people like him a chance for a new start.
"The war left me with no one," he says. "And we saw all kinds of things. But you know, there is a mara running this country. The government says young people are the future, the most important building block for this country- but they treat us like shit. They see our tattoos and think we are worthless. Instead of giving us grief, why don't they give us jobs instead? This society I live in, it's so busy. So we started this Homeboyz group, it helps us survive this system, where the only things that matter are the 3-Ps: Pisto (money). Poder (power). Placer (privilege)."

The ways of dealing with this violent social scourge vary. One social worker in a town north of San Salvador says the Catholic priest there actually practices exorcisms. Others, practice denial. In his New Year's message, President Calderon Sol reassured Salvadorans telling them delinquency was no longer a problem. Regardless, his government is creating a new police force to combat it.

In a small, but important, attempt at re-building a more tolerant and caring society, 1998 was officially declared "The Year of Values". As part of this effort to encourage a social transition, the national school curriculum now has compulsory classes aimed at teaching and promoting moral and civic values. Published in national newspapers, each academic week is given a corresponding value -ranging from hygiene to patriotism and liberty to democracy.

As for the economic transition, there is a twisted irony to the politics of economics in El Salvador these days. During the war, the United States bank rolled the forces of the right, to keep them in power. Today, US money is still a crucial factor, but in an altogether different way.

Conservative figures show El Salvador still gets about $3-million a day from the US. It is no longer US government money. It is something called "pobres dolares" (poor dollars), which are, in effect, remittances. They come from the numbers of Salvadorans living in the US - who fled there in the 80s. It is the number one source of income in El Salvador. It beats out industry, coffee, agriculture, and the burgeoning financial sector (which is the only thriving economic sector in the country at present). Handouts from expatriates are the crux of El Salvador's economy. The consequences of this are clear - an income the host government cannot control, cannot build on, but on which it has an unhealthy dependence.

"This money allows the country to have a kind of stability on the macro-economic level," says Rodolfo Cardenal, vice-rector of the UCA and head of the university's polling unit. "But you can't assume that this income is a steady source. There is a creeping generational reality that is destined to impose itself. Right now, you have husbands, sons, mothers who are sending money back to the families they've left behind. The second generation of these people won't have that kind of loyalty to family or country. And that's why this generation is so important. They need the opportunities to creative lives and build futures in this country."

But the country's wealth is still in the hands of a few. The new elite has multiplied its fortunes by speculating in the financial sector- the only boom sector in El Salvador. No longer called an oligarchy, this group is known as la argolla dorada (the golden necklace). The economic
stranglehold this group wields inside El Salvador is made worse by *the ricos dolares* the group exports. Still, the country remains "the darling of the World Bank," even though it suffers widespread under-employment (particularly among younger age groups).

Those committed to real change say the country's transition must unfold in all sectors. When Victoria Marina de Aviles speaks of change, she takes an almost holistic approach. As chief of the government's human rights office, she has spearheaded efforts towards real social and economic change by representing the interests of citizens who would otherwise wield little political clout. She is lauded as a vice-presidential candidate for the left - and some consider her a possible Presidential candidate. While she coyly avoids the issue of her political ambitions, she boldly speaks of the kind of change she thinks is still pending:

"It is a challenge to awaken a sense of what human rights really mean. It represents an institutional challenge. And much of our daily work is to make people, the government and industry understand that there are rights - economic and social - that must be respected. And more than that, must be protected. You can't be a human being without food, education, a house or job."

Ms. De Aviles is a woman who is respected, admired and in some cases reviled since, as she puts it, "I'm constantly knocking on the doors of power, reminding them that they have to observe human rights. The doors of power in this country are used to being closed. And don't like to be forced open."

In the municipal elections of 1997, 60% of Salvadorans did not bother to vote. Weary and cynical they chose not to participate in a system many believe excludes them. In the presidential elections next year there is an opportunity for unprecedented political change. Polls claim the left has a chance to finally push its way through the doors of power and into the Presidency. The FMLN claims it would institute unprecedented socio-economic change once in power. For party stalwarts, the power of the Presidency represents the ultimate symbol of a long struggle and a difficult transition. Do the prospects of winning on March 7th, 1999, make the sacrifices and the price paid, with it? For Lionel Gonzalez, whose *nom de guerre* during the civil war was Salvador Sanchez, and who remains a senior member of the FMLN brain trust, the answer is clear:

"In my own case, I do think it was worth it, because the FMLN didn't end with the peace accords. And the hope of change didn't end with the peace accords. We meant to change the kind of fight we were waging, we continue waging, we continue fighting. So, from that point of view, yes it was worth it and it's been a huge achievement. Before, to speak against the government was tantamount to signing one's own death certificate. We at least have the basics for building a civil society now. And people have to define what they want for El Salvador.

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3 Ricos dolares are dollars that are exported out of El Salvador for more secure investment elsewhere.

4 The country's annual growth rate between 1992-1995 was 6-7%. 
That's why the FMLN will continue as a political force and continue to push for change in this country).

For the families gathered on January 31st at the Parque Cuscutlan the answer to the question of whether it was all worth it, was equally clear. As they hung the portraits of the missing relatives they still hope will re-appear one day, the tears, the hurt, the nightmare is still very much a part of their daily lives. The struggle continues. The transition is painful. And real change will never simply be regarded in electoral terms.

Los Retornados
by Cori Howard

“I will force you to live once again in their burning wounds, not so that we can liger as if at a station, when departing, or pound the earth with our forehead. Not so that we can fill our heart with salty water, but so that we can walk knowingly, touch rectitude with decisions infinitely loaded with meaning. So that severity can become a condition for joy, so that we can become invincible.”

-Pablo Neruda, Canto General.

Carmen Silva taught me about risk. This crazy 68-year-old artist was shoving past the throngs of sweaty teenagers, through a crowd packed so tight that I thought I would be squashed to death like at soccer games, past the security guards and into the stadium. All this so I could hear the music of Sol y Lluvia. This is the band, one of her favourites, which sang "Adios General" during the anti-Pinochet protests years ago. Today, they’ve updated their song and now it's called, "Adios Senador" for the dictator who just became a "senator-for-life".

Carmen is thrilled by the presence of so many young people. It reminds her of the fervour and excitement of the Allende years and it is rarely felt or seen in Chile today. So tonight is an exercise in nostalgia, in bringing the past into the present. As we watch the teenagers singing against the violence of the past and the absurdity of today's political reality, it is clear at least they haven't forgotten.

Forgetting is not something that "retornados" do well. Unlike the majority of Chileans who are tired of talking about the past and who just want to move forward and enjoy the fruits of Chile's current economic boom, retornados spent years in exile living in the past and upon their return to Chile, find themselves reluctant to partake in their country's cultural amnesia. And so they talk about the past, their own and their country's, constantly trying to reconcile their nostalgia with their new lives.

That is what I set out to find in my fellowship research: how memories of the past have influenced those former exiles who returned to Chile, how it has affected their self-perception, their professional success and their definition of home, country and identity. In other words,
how these "retornados" are coping with the process of "desexilio," as it is called in Spanish, a process many describe as being harder than exile.

Perhaps part of the reason that desexilio is so difficult is because most exiles spent so many years outside of Chile. Says Carmen: "When I arrived in Ecuador and rented an apartment, I didn't let my daughter unpack or put anything on the walls because we were coming back. This was going to be two or three months and Pinochet would turn over the government to the democrats. We all believed that. We all had the same attitude. Don't settle down, man. We're going back. Don't buy anything. Don't unpack. Then we started to realize that it was going to be a long, long time." Carmen lived in Ecuador for 15 years. One son was in Canada. Another was in Cuba. They all returned and started to rebuild their family life after Carmen's name was lifted from the blacklist in 1987.

That was the year the Pope was set to visit Chile and faced with enormous international pressure, he asked that a list of exiles be allowed to return as a condition for his visit. Carmen was on that list. As were many others that I interviewed. But it wasn't the first time exiles had returned.

Retornados began to enter Chile clandestinely after 1978 to help fight against the dictatorship, with much risk to their lives. But it wasn't until 1982 that the military regime accepted the return of a limited number of people. Month after month, lists of names were announced and published to demonstrate the goodwill of the government and its respect for human rights and to satisfy increasing internal and external public pressure. In August 1988, everyone was allowed to return without any restriction or need for official permission. This apparent openness was a political public relations campaign to regain public support for the 1989 referendum, and the presidential election the following year. When the first presidential and parliamentary elections brought an end to Pinochet's 17-year rule and a beginning to a democratic government, the rate of return increased by 30%.

The newly elected government, which included more than a handful of former exiles, began to establish incentives to encourage Chilean diaspora, which is estimated at over a million, to come home. They did so, says Volodia Teitelboim, a former communist senator and well-known author, because "the majority of the best people in Chile were expelled. Intellectuals, academics, artists, students, political leaders, trade union leaders, women's leaders." From 1990 to 1994, the Oficina Nacional de Retorno, funded by Chilean government and various foreign governments, provided airplane tickets, tax exemptions for things like luxury cars and domestic goods, assistance with recognition of professional titles, loans and lines of credit and free medical care.

But Chileans generally believe that most exiles will never return. So far, the numbers of retornados have reached about 100,000. From Canada, there have been approximately 2,000 retornados, out of an exile population of approximately 24,000. In Vancouver, about 400 of the 4,000 have returned. But in the less developed countries that were home to Chilean exiles, the percentage of return is much higher. In countries like Ecuador, for example, almost all exiles returned. Says Carmen: "In Canada, they live much better, have nicer houses, social security, schools. But in Ecuador everyone came back because the working conditions were the same. They had nothing to lose."
Reasons for Return.

"I loved then, and still love now, the Santiago evenings in the summertime. Even now that smog has ruined the Central Valley, now that too many cars befoul the air and the trees have been cut down to make way for ugly blocks of buildings and infested avenues, even now that we have mercilessly dirtied what was once a magical landscape, even now there still remains that sense of wonder and gratitude when the sun begins to go down...It is an illusion, it cannot last, this interlude of twilight when we seem to be blessed, when we seem to have refound our lost path, and yet for a while it is true, the body, the breeze, that quiet moment suspended between light and darkness that you never want to end."

-Ariel Dorfman, "Heading South, Looking North"

There are, of course, thousands of different reasons that exiles have returned to Chile. But for all retornados, it was their fierce sense of identity and a nostalgia for what was that created the deep longing to return. And it is for that reason that most retornados feel anger and disappointment when they return to a country that doesn't resemble the Chile of their memories.

Naim Nomez is a poet and professor who lived in Toronto for eleven years. He explains the role of nostalgia like this: "From the first moment of exile, one continues to look back at the place of origin, the memory frozen by trauma and overcome by the nostalgia of a lost paradise. The fixation on the culture of the original country is seen as time of plentitude, broken by the social cataclysm that drove us out of our motherland."

"But what land can we compare to such abyss innumerable, where bone after bone your reef of frozen columns is flayed, is there a place where hopeless desperation won't oust us where the walls of the city will embrace us and where you can open the other shore of your heart to me?"

-Naim Nomez, A Letter from Bellflower

Despite the fact that many retornados know their country had changed in their absence, knew that Pinochet's economic reforms meant there would be unknown developments and that his political repression meant untold fear, they still struggled with the new Chile. Many felt the country had sold its soul, leaving a highly individualistic, materialistic society.

In the book Chile: Death in the South, Manuel Guerrero describes the country he found upon his return in 1982: "It was three Chiles. One is living on such a succulent salary that it recalls the last days of Pompeii. There is also the Chile that is trying to disguise its poverty by suffering in silence. Then there is the Chile of the majority, which is caught up in misery, hiding itself, but trying to sell a piece of chocolate, a comb or mirror." Three years after he returned, Guerrero was found with his throat cut at the school where he was a teaching supervisor.

Questioning the New Chile

For retornados who returned before democracy, questioning the system was fraught with danger. Today, it is interesting to note that retornados seem to be the only Chileans questioning
anything; mostly their questions focus on the neo-liberal model of economic development. "Is this what we fought for all those years? More malls!" asks a retornado who spent many years in exile travelling and raising money for Chile's left-wing parties. It is clear he does not like the way Chile has developed. He echoes a criticism of Chile I hear from every single retornado I talk to: that Chile has lost its solidarity, its sense of having a common goal.

Raul Vergara, a former air force officer who was tried and sentenced to death in the months following the coup for his role in Allende's government, also feels alienated by the new Chile. Vergara's death sentence was commuted to 20 years in prison, and later to five years in prison and exile. His case is unusual in its extremity, but also because he didn't want to return to Chile. He just followed his Nicaraguan wife who had received a scholarship to study here. Vergara says it took six months for him to find a job, a time he describes as degrading and demoralizing. "I don't feel 100% at home here," he says. "Society is getting more impersonal, the quality of life is very low. You don't enjoy anything, just your job, long line-ups to arrive home tired. Very seldom do you meet friends because they are working and one has to think what is happening? What I would like to do is not exactly this."

The Myths of Exile

Retornados may be the ones asking a lot of questions, but they are doing it quietly. Their low-profile is the result of having had to battle resentment from those who stayed, and having had to try to break the myth of the "golden exile." Carmen explains: "At the beginning, I don't think people realized that it wasn't such a beautiful exile for anybody. Families were torn apart. The loss was greater than whatever economic benefits they had."

But, as Carlos Altamirano explains, for exiles, the myth-breaking began outside Chile. "I believe you get to know your own country better seeing it from outside. So many myths about our own ideas were destroyed. In Chile, they say the fruit is the best in the world, the women are the best in the world. It's a bit of a joke, but they still believe it. You still love your country, your family, your friends. We missed our food, our meals. But we got to know that all the world has wonderful fruit, wonderful women, and wine." Altamirano was declared public enemy number one on the eve of the coup. A price was put on his head and his face appeared on the blacklist posters all over the country. "Some people only know their small town in Chile," he says. "That was their whole universe. So in that sense, it was positive in spite of the hardship of living without families, having to adapt to other lifestyles, learn other languages. Exile enriched them."

Ana Maria Quiroz recalls her years in Canada fondly. She spent many years in Vancouver teaching at Simon Fraser University, but she's been back in Santiago since the late 80s when she started Casa Canada as a meeting place for retornados and a base of support for anti-Pinochet activities. "People accepted us in Canada. We had support, people working with us who were sympathetic to our cause. Here everyone was struggling to survive and life was hard. You wanted to tell people about Canada and your experiences, but people weren't that interested. You had to get on the bus, get aboard and go with what was happening here. And when you finally found work, it was like you had to be at the bottom of the line because you were seen to be someone who had it good because you were outside. There was this tension between those
who were outside and those who stayed and suffered. You had to pay your dues for joining in the struggle late."

Those who returned during the dictatorship, like Ana Maria, had little idea what to expect. Opposition leaders often faced death threats, or worse. But driven by the struggle against the dictatorship, many felt that at least they were working together for something. "There was curfew at eight," says Ana Maria, "and you had to be inside your house. There was a fear of walking down the street, a fear when you went out to demonstrations, the fear I felt was something I had never experienced. It took so much courage and energy, but there was also a great feeling that you weren't alone. There were a lot of people working on these little events that were taking place everywhere and that gave you energy and courage to do it."

In Politics

Perhaps the biggest difference between those who returned during the height of the dictatorship and those who waited until democracy was reinstated was the risk they were willing to take to fight for a political cause. Some of those who took the risk are now senators and deputies. Like Socialist Senator Ricardo Nunez. He returned to Chile in 1979 to fight against Pinochet and organize his party. He muses on why exiles have been so politically successful: "Many of us, when we were detained or persecuted by the military, were very young. And when we returned we were also very young. That allowed us to be politically active, especially after 1983 when many people came back. And those who returned came with knowledge of how to live in other countries, other languages, other cultures, other political parties, other experiences. And many who came back then were political leaders of universities, unions, parties. So it wasn't difficult to reinsert ourselves into political life."

Nunez believes about 15% of Chile's current political representatives are retornados. What difference that makes to the way they do their job is hard to measure. Most former exiles I spoke to believe that political retornados have sold out. "Many returned with an ability to accept material prosperity and they changed politically," says Volodia Teitelboim, a well-known Chilean writer and former communist senator. "They came back and assumed a compromise with Pinochet not to alter the institution of dictatorship. So I believe they administered the dictatorship under the name of democracy. They sold their souls. Many who were in exile participated in that because it meant participation in power."

But Nunez says that people have judged them too soon, that it is different to fight against a dictatorship than to build a democracy. He says the former is easier, "because democracy isn't just for me, it's also for those on the right who supported Pinochet. We must share with our adversaries, live with them. I sit 10 metres from Pinochet and 15 metres from the police chief who was directly responsible for many killings. Building democracy requires patience. We haven't stopped fighting. It's just the fight is different."

But the majority of retornados don't have the material advantage that the politicians do. They have trouble finding work and the wages they merit. And there is still political discrimination against retornados because they are seen as having left because they did something wrong, because they were too radical, and supporters of Allende. I tried to find retornados who head
large companies, who were successful in the business sector, but to no avail. A university professor had warned me I wouldn't find anyone like that. "Those are the people who didn't need to leave," he said. "They were under Pinochet's wing. They still are."

In Business

What I did find in large numbers were retornados who were struggling to find work, to make ends meet, to survive in Chile's new economic reality. Mario Vargas, at the Organization of International Migration, helps retornados start small businesses by providing loans at low interest. He explains that at least 60% of the businesses he assists fail. He says it's because they don't understand that the ways of doing business in Chile have changed.

"Retornados worked in other countries cleaning for ten years," he says. "They arrive here and open a restaurant and they think they know how, but the system is totally different. People here, for example, copy. So if you open a candy store and it's successful, everyone will open a store on the same street and your business will fail. And also, retornados were seen as rich, crazy gringos. People wouldn't help them. There was no loyalty."

But the more serious problem lies with a program that began in 1990 when Chile's Banco del Estado and German bank put together a fund to provide loans to retornados wanting to start businesses. The German government gave 10 million marks to the program at 30 years and 2% interest. But the Chilean bank put in the peso equivalent but raised the interest rate to 14% over eight years. With such high interest rates, even successful businesses have had trouble making payments. I talked to a Mexican restaurant owner, Sara Rodriguez, who has been working seven days a week, 12 hours a day for six years and hasn't been able to pay back her loan yet. But at least she still has her business. More than 50% of participants in this program have gone into bankruptcy. Defaulting in this program has meant houses have been seized, families have been broken, and there have even been two cases of related suicides.

This situation prompted the formation of a group, La Corporacion de Retornados, who are taking the Chilean government to court in order to prevent the authorities from taking their cars and houses and to prove that it is only legal to repay their debt according to the German government's original stipulations.

Social Values

It's not just in economics that retornados are having trouble. As the book Exile, 1978-1988 notes, "Exile constitutes a situation of violence with a powerful potential for the destruction of the individual, the family and the social system." This was an area all the retornados I spoke with had experienced. Most had sons or daughters or husbands or wives living in other countries. Most had been married several times. And for a country like Chile, where Catholic family values are entrenched, the breakdown of these values in exile has made the process of reintegration more difficult. Single women, it seems, have the most difficulty, as divorce is illegal and there are few resources or activities for those not married.

I did not spend too much time on this aspect of return as I wanted to focus more on the political
and cultural implications of exile and return. The other area that I covered only in passing was the subject of the children of retornados.

The crisis of identity suffered by the children who return is often worse than that of their parents. Most left the country when they were really young, or were born in exile, and return to a country almost unknown to them, the country that they heard about in bedtime stories. It was the land of their parents and the friends of their parents, a land unknown, yet also desired.

In the late 80s, several groups were formed with funds from foreign governments to assist the children in adjusting to their new lives. Noemi Baeza ran the program known as PIDEE. She said that those who returned during the dictatorship had many psychological problems and were reluctant to look at the good things about life in Chile. Many refused food, had problems with sleeping, bedwetting. "One child said something very sad," she said. "For my parents, this is a return. But for me this is an exile."

There are many Chileans who have not returned to Chile because of the difficulties they know their children will encounter and they do not want their children to suffer as they did. But underneath that feeling, there is always the nagging desire for their children and themselves to live in Chile.

**Assessing the Impact**

It was more difficult than I thought to measure the contributions of retornados to daily life in Chile. Perhaps that is because they have not made a significant impact. Or because not enough time has passed to assess how the education, experience and skills that the retornados brought back have affected the life of the country. Or how their non-Chilean husbands, wives and children will affect the homogenous culture and sciences."

Says Senator Nunez: "Chile is not like Bolivia where immigrants sent back a lot of money to their families to have a great economic impact. Chileans who are living outside of Chile have had a greater impact in terms of cultural achievements on the outside. Their children have a greater cultural awareness and higher education. If they returned to Chile, it would be a great support to our country's economy, culture and sciences."

Many of those who have returned have undoubtedly already begun to make those kinds of contributions: the politicians, journalists, doctors, artists. But exile has enriched the reputation of Chile in the rest of the world, more than it has in Chile itself. There is a long list of famous Chileans living in other countries: Isabel Allende, Ariel Dorfman, Ramon Ruiz, Luis Sepulveda, to name a few.

"It's not just writers," says Altamirano of the Chilean diaspora. "In science, medicine, political science, in all these fields they have done really well. That's the positive side of exile. Thousands of Chileans have left the Chilean name very well. They are the compensation for Pinochet's horrible and brutal acts."

By sending so many of its citizens into exile, the military was attempting to rid itself of
opposition. It didn't work. Nor did their attempts to destroy the Chilean identity. The struggle against the dictatorship, particularly the one waged from exile, enshrined that identity and kept it alive and growing.

It's not only identity that Chilean exiles had a role in preserving. The political work of exiles was an important contributing factor in the eventual downfall of the dictatorship. By raising awareness around the world, by lobbying political leaders in more influential countries, and by voting against Pinochec in the 1989 plebiscite, Chile's exiles continued unabated in exerting the kind of political power that had resulted in their expulsion.

**The End of Exile?**

There are no more exiles; those who live outside Chile lost their status as political refugees by United Nations decree in 1996. The process of return will continue, if a little more slowly than in the past, but many will remain forever in exile. But with the ever-evolving road to democracy becoming more clear, those still living outside Chile may find increasing opportunities, professional and personal, to remain connected in some way with their homeland, just as many retornados will remain connected to their country of exile, through friends, family, work and memories.

After 1973, Chileans could be found in almost every corner of the world. Close to 120 countries received Chilean exiles; one can only imagine the variety of cultures, experiences, values, customs and languages that constitute part of the heritage of those who returned home. Exile opened Chile up to the world, and the consequences continue in strange and more predictable forms. There's free trade, cross-cultural and professional exchanges, and a greater awareness and understanding of each other.

The challenge that lies ahead for Chile now is how to maintain that strong sense of Chilean identity with the high-speed Americanization of the country and the new-found obsession with consumption. One of the keys to preserving the Chilean identity seems to lie in the healing power of reconciliation. But Chile is a country that refuses to embark down that path, refusing to acknowledge the crimes of the past and hold anyone responsible. The process of reconciliation in Chile has not even begun. It has at least started with retornados, but there is a long way to go.

Altamirano explains the conflict: "I don't have reconciliation of the past and present. I still have those separate. But the present is a bit negative. It's a process that need more time. I have only been back six years. It should be enough time to reconcile both Chiles, the old with the new, but it's not. I have nostalgia for the last countries I lived in. I miss France, the landscape, the nature, the culture, the intellect that is light years from Chile. This is repeated amongst exiles. When you spend a long time in exile, you are forever in exile. It's hard to redefine your real country, your real home. You have different homes. You don't have one country, one mother. There are lots of mothers."
Carlos Chen caught me off guard. Preparing for two months of studying justice in Guatemala had exposed me to many documents and reports, but to only a few Guatemalans. Now here I was, in a small town in Guatemala, putting a tape recorder in front of a man who had lost his entire family in a massacre in 1982. Carlos began to weep as if it had happened yesterday, telling me how 177 women and children died that day.

"I am alive," he told me, wiping the tears from his deeply lined face. "But I am not at peace."

The same could be said for his country.

Almost two years after peace accords were signed in 1996, many Guatemalans find themselves in a country no longer at war, but hardly at peace, either. For some, like Carlos, the war's scars have yet to heal, his current life overshadowed by the violence and losses of the past. Others are bearing the scars of the transition to peace, suffering from the crime wave that is sweeping the country, frustrated by the inability of the police and courts to stop it. And amidst this, groups who were marginalized in the past—such as the Mayans—are struggling to take advantage of the small window of opportunity that the peace accords have given them to contribute to the building of a civil society.

These themes of past, present and future became the basis of my research on justice in Guatemala: the hangover of war and justice never done; the current crisis of transition and the lawlessness that is resulting; and the push for a just future by building institutions that form the backbone of a civilian, rather than military, society.

The Scars of the Past

The area around Rabinal, a town in a beautiful valley five hours north of the capital, is checkered with mass graves. Residents know of more than 60, some containing a few bodies, some holding hundreds. Some of the most notorious massacres of the early 1980s were here. The scars of the war are very fresh, partly because the victims and survivors live in the same communities as their attackers.

I visited here in 1995, when one of the first memorials to the massacres was unveiled in the town cemetery. Survivors had exhumed the mass grave of the Rio Negro massacre with the help of forensic anthropologists, documented the bones for use in a trial they thought would likely never happen, and reburied them. The plot stretched more than 50 metres behind the monument.

At the time, the war was not yet over. Then, justice meant simply breaking the silence they had kept for years. A plaque on the memorial shows the names of every victim and names the army and civilian patrol under its command as the perpetrators.
This year, I returned to Rabinal to see what two years of peace had brought to their struggle. Although charges had been laid against three of the civil patrollers who participated in a number of massacres, the case had dragged on for years with no trial.

In the meantime, not waiting for the courts give them a sense of justice, a group of survivors are planning to build a museum on the site of the former army base to commemorate the horrors they witnessed. They are adamant that the truth be told so that their descendants remember what happened. For them, silence and secrecy make for fear and impunity.

I visited Rabinal on Guatemala's Independence Day, which was also the anniversary of a massacre in the town square that left hundreds dead. I followed the group's day of protest. Among the revelers and schoolchildren running torch relays, the survivors staged a play on the church steps while men who had massacred their family members looked on. The same men have repeatedly threatened the widows and are suspected of burning their corn mill down. Because of this intimidation, some widows told me, there are many survivors who are simply too afraid to protest publicly.

The next morning, on the site of a mass grave in a cornfield just out of town, the widows wept and prayed with the help of a Mayan priest. For Mayans, a connection with the dead is very important. But the widows are denied this because the mass grave is on private property and they cannot visit regularly to pray, light candles and leave flowers.

After the protest, I interviewed some of the survivors, including Carlos Chen. For many of the widows, justice was more about reparations than vengeance. Many told me that it was for God to decide the fate of the killers, but for the government to repay all they lost in the war. Most lost everything they had when the army destroyed their villages - houses, crops, animals. Those who lost husbands also lost their livelihoods and had to rely on their weaving to make a few quetzales; their children lost their connection to farming and must work in other jobs, often far away. While the government agreed in the peace accords to help the victims of war, it has yet to fulfil this promise.

Back in Guatemala City, I interviewed some of the people trying to help the victims of Rabinal. For them, justice is not only about reparations, but about bringing accountability to the perpetrators so that impunity in Guatemala can one day be stopped.

Maria Dolores Iztepe and Frank LaRue of CALDH, the Centre for Legal Action on Human Rights, have for five years been pursuing court action over the Rio Negro massacre. Finally, in November, as I was leaving Guatemala, the trial of the three civil patrollers began. Then, just last week, the three were convicted and sentenced to death.

The most famous survivor of Rio Negro has mixed feelings about the trial. Jesus Tecu, who watched his mother and brothers massacred and then was enslaved for two years by their killers, won the Reebok Human Rights Award in 1996. Tecu noted that only three of the dozens of patrollers and soldiers that took part - not the military officers who directed the massacre - were tried. It is a pattern in many cases here, that the material but not the intellectual authors of crimes are prosecuted.
The peace accords have in some ways accelerated the process of addressing the past. I travelled with one of the teams of forensic anthropologists who are fanning out across the country exhuming mass graves - once a rare occurrence. We visited a site in the hamlet of El Mango, Peten, where the army killed suspected guerrilla sympathizers. Anthropologists and legal workers say they are rushing to do as many exhumations as possible now, during the official schedule of the implementation of the peace accords. Later, they fear, money and political will to do any more may disappear. The exhumations are also necessary to gather physical evidence if any of the cases get to trial.

**The Pain of the Present**

When I first arrived in Guatemala, I spent a few weeks in school to brush up on my Spanish. Not only did this help me improve my ability to communicate with Guatemalans, it gave me the chance to find out what they were saying about justice in peacetime. What they were talking about was crime.

From my Spanish teacher to the family I lived with to people I met in the town square, everyone had a crime story. One had a friend wrongfully convicted of murder. Another's neighbourhood was terrorized by a gang. Others warned tourists about dangerous spots where they would need armed guards.

The newspapers were full of stories about criminals, too: kidnappers, bus robbers, murderers, and a story every day on prisoners escaping from jail. Trial stories often revolved around whether the convict would receive the death penalty.

Every few days, a report about a lynching would surface. More often than not, a suspected thief would be caught and burned alive by villagers in a rural area who were fed up with crime.

This is a common syndrome for countries emerging from war, seen in neighbouring El Salvador and as far away as South Africa. Peace reduces the iron grip of the military, but civilian institutions that replace them are still weak from years of being undermined by a militarized society. Criminals quickly fill the vacuum that results.

To get closer to this problem, I travelled to a place that had experienced firsthand the paradoxes of peace. The Ixil triangle, an area of indigenous people in the remote northwest Cuchumatanes mountains, is the site of a million-dollar justice initiative, and a recent lynching.

This area had never had access to the state judicial system. One third of municipalities in Guatemala do not have a judge or justice of the peace. Residents here had to travel at least five hours to another town to find a court or prosecutor. Poverty put the cost of such trips beyond the reach of most.

Last year, the UN funded the opening of a centre for the administration of justice in Nebaj, the area's main town, which brought a judge, prosecutor, a public defender and a free legal clinic to the area. This year, the new national civilian police force (PNC) arrived as well.
Despite their presence, in September a mob from a nearby village attacked the Nebaj police station, got their hands on two robbery suspects and burned them alive. The area's first local judge fled in fear.

This lynching, like the more than 130 in the past two years, was an indication of just how far Guatemala has to go in shedding its violent past and in building the rule of law.

Ironically, the legacy of the army's iron-fisted rule in this area during the war is now haunting efforts to establish civilian authority. In the Ixil triangle, hard hit during the war, the army had resettled thousands of villagers into army controlled model villages and made the men participate in civil defense patrols known as PACs. These patrols upset the traditional structures of authority in many places. Despite being officially disbanded, their leaders continue to wield power in many places.

Former PACs are now being linked to lynching. One indication of this is the organized, rather than spontaneous, fashion of many lynching. For example, a RCMP constable working for the UN told me he had witnessed men organizing themselves village-by-village in ranks during an attempted lynching.

An intriguing aspect of the lynching in Nebaj - that the police officers had let their prisoners out of the jail in fear for their own lives - led me to do some research into the PNC.

The old force, deemed to corrupt and ineffective to fix, is being completely replaced. Nebaj, in fact, had kicked out the old force in 1992 and had no police presence until 1998, when the PNC arrived. Although many people I talked to agreed the new force was better than the old - less corrupt, better equipped, more officers - many others felt the PNC had some structural problems that would prevent it from reaching its potential as a civilian force. Some felt strongly that it was the same old force in new uniforms.

They pointed to two main problems.

First, Guatemala chose a military model for the new, supposedly civilian, force. Many human rights observers and the RCMP officers observing the force for the UN say a military model limits the effectiveness of the police in number of ways:

Military-style structures allow officers to feel superior to the people they serve, leading to abuses of power.

- Strict hierarchies limit the autonomy of individual officers, making them less responsible and less proactive. Initiative is seen as insubordination, one observer told me, so most officers simply wait for orders. This can have deadly consequences, such as in Nebaj where junior officers had nobody senior enough to tell them what to do when confronted with a lynch mob.

- Officers are stationed in barracks and do not live in the communities they serve, doing rotations for 20 days in duty and 10 days back in their hometown. In contrast, the community policing model that has been used in Canada brings officers much closer to the people they serve and the issues they face.
Training of the new officers has been called inadequate. Education standards have been lowered to attract more applicants. And while the new force is doing an admirable job of recruiting natives and women, these groups' representation is still far below societal levels. Some observers say a points-based entry system rather than rigid guidelines for education and height would allow more native people to enter. For example, in Nebaj, many Ixil men are simply too short to meet the minimum height requirement.

Second, observers are scandalized by the number of former military and former police being admitted to the new force. Dozens of former army officers, some from the army's most notorious branches, have joined, while up to 90 per cent of members of the corrupt former police force are being recycled into the new. In neighbouring El Salvador, recycling was limited to 20 per cent of former officers.

With the continued presence of joint army-police patrols and the recent addition of soldiers to help patrol the crime-ridden streets, many critics see a supposedly civilian service continue to be over-shadowed by the military.

Military might and corruption also pervades the justice system, despite attempts at reform in the last few years. Following the peace accords, a committee identified many problems with the justice system and recommended solutions. But while some new judges and justices of the peace are being trained, critics say the recommendations are slow to be implemented. One study this year found that:

- Judges, witnesses and prosecutors are routinely threatened and sometimes killed. In October, the prosecutor in a case implicating soldiers in the 1995 massacre of 11 villagers in Xaman fled the country in fear of his life.
- Judges and other legal officials are poorly trained. A UN study found 500 cases in which judges showed poor knowledge of basic judicial concepts.
- Lack of coordination between the judiciary, prosecutors and the police has resulted in a "slow and fallible" system. Suspects awaiting trial make up three quarters of the prison population.
- Lack of rehabilitation programs in overcrowded prisons has led to high rate of recidivism.

While many observers concede that the justice system cannot be fixed overnight, they see troubling signs that the corruption and lack of judicial independence found during the war years continues unabated.

They point to the number of cases involving army personnel that have dragged out for years without resolution. But the case that troubles human rights groups the most is the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi.

Gerardi was bludgeoned to death in April, just two days after delivering the REMHI report, the Catholic Church's study of the conflict that blamed most atrocities on the military. It also explained how the army's Presidential High Command - which was to be dissolved under the peace accords but as yet has not been- orchestrated repression and controlled the presidency.
Even though the timing, the location - three blocks from the headquarters of the Presidential High Command - and witnesses' accounts strongly suggest the murder was politically motivated, prosecutors have so far not investigated any military suspects.

While the police and the courts wrestle with their demons, the people on the street still have to deal with crime. I was fascinated by the different ways different groups were responding to the crisis. In the countryside, some villagers are taking the law into their own hands to fight robberies. In the city, common criminals are often killed, execution style, leading some groups to say there's a social cleansing operation under way. And the victims for kidnappers, mostly the middle class and powerful upper class, are turning to the death penalty. All these responses are the legacy of a country couched in violent solutions for years.

**Mayan Law: Back to the Future**

In the midst of my investigations of crime and justice, I noticed a great deal of talk about the resurgence of Mayan law, the traditional justice system of Guatemala's majority. Because native justice had been so much in the news in Canada in recent years, I was interested in how it worked in Guatemala.

Guatemala's 'other' justice system has functioned for hundreds of years but has not been recognized officially until this October, when Congress approved constitutional changes that must still be ratified by referendum in 1999.

I travelled to a small Mayan village to get a glimpse of how it actually works. And although traditions are different all over the country, my experiences, coupled with interviews of people studying the system, gave me a good idea of the stark differences between Maya and Western legal traditions.

Like the official system, Mayan traditions were badly damaged by years of war and military influence. On my visit to Salquil Grande, I found a community that was successful in rebuilding its traditions after years of military domination. Other communities lost their traditions along with their elders during the violence and disruption of war. Some Mayan organizations are now trying to rebuild, by transferring knowledge from community to community.

Back in Guatemala City, I attended a conference on justice and indigenous people. This was an invaluable opportunity to hear experts not just from Guatemala, but from all over the Americas, including Canada.

Critics of the recognition of Mayan law usually say that one country can't have two justice systems. Supporters say that this is the only way a truly multicultural nation can work, by developing new and creative solutions for a diverse population. I saw some of these solutions starting to emerge. In Chajul, a small Ixil town, an indigenous justice of the peace is trying to combine the restorative conflict resolution techniques of Mayan law in his role as the representative of the state system. In Nebaj, a public legal clinic is also using consensual techniques the local people are accustomed to, and at the end of the process they have legal title to land or a writ that is legitimate in the state system as well.
Returning home to the heated debates over the Nisga'a treaty, my interviews in Guatemala suddenly put the Canadian multicultural context in a new light for me.

**Conclusion**

Guatemalan and foreign observers share an ambivalence about the state of Guatemala and its peace process as it approaches its third year. On one hand, they are profoundly disturbed and often quite cynical over the lack of real, structural change that they feel is needed to prevent the roots of conflicts from spreading again. But on the other, the peace process and international presence has given them the first real opening in years to have dialogue with entrenched powers, and they say it is an opportunity that they can't afford to pass up. The next few years will show how much political will there is to continue the efforts spelled out in the peace accords.

Nicaragua: les générations sacrifiées

de Guy Taillefer

"Entre las malas maneras de morirse de hambre en Nicaragua, la peor es encontrar empleo"
Alvaro Gutiérrez, peintre et poète

Je rentre du Nicaragua avec des opinions bien tranchées. Comme éditorialiste, je vais pouvoir les exprimer dans les pages du *Devoir*. Ça tombe bien. On prend trop de raccourcis avec la vérité et il arrive qu'à force de nuances on la fasse mentir. Je rentre avec le sentiment que, pour toucher à la vérité, il faut parler du Nicaragua non pas seulement en journaliste, mais aussi en polémiste. En ce sens, considérez que je vous soumets ici un essai autant qu'un rapport final.

A quoi tient ma "radicalisation"? Elle tient au scandale des coûts sociaux et humains que fait subir aux Nicaraguayens et à leurs enfants, aujourd'hui et pour des générations à venir, l'application par le gouvernement de droite du président Arnoldo Aleman d'orientations économiques qui lui sont dictées par le FMI. Elle tient à la complicité de certaines ONG qui au bout du compte, font de la reproduction de la pauvreté leur pain et leur beurre. Elle tient aux complicités des gouvernements donateurs qui voient leur bonne volonté détournée par leurs intérêts commerciaux- des complicités qui en font aussi, d'une certaine manière des instuments de l'appauvrissement de la population. Elle tient à la constatation de la vérité toute simple que toute l'aide internationale du monde- le Nicaragua s'est fait promettre l'hiver dernier une aide de 1.8 milliards $US sur trois ans- ne remplacera jamais un gouvernement national qui fait une priorité de l'éducation et de la santé et qui fait des efforts pour redistribuer la richesse- quoique dans le cas du Nicaragua, pays le plus pauvre de l'hémisphère après Haiti, il soit à certains égards absurde de parler de richesse.

En lieu et place, le Nicaragua navigue à vue et se désarticule socialement sous la gouverne d'une démocratie de façade enveloppée dans de belles lois à portée sociale que son gouvernement n'a
ni les moyens ni surtout la volonté d'appliquer. Si bien que personne au Nicaragua ne s'étonnera si le Code de l'enfance récemment signé par le président Aleman demeure lettre morte. Le Nicaragua législatif n'a pas grand-chose à voir avec le Nicaragua réel.

Mondialisation, FMI, complicités commerciales, démocraties de façade, appauvrissement: ces mots creux du discours journalistique. Mon séjour au Nicaragua, justement, m'aura permis de leur donner un poids inestimable de réalité concrète. Si ce n'est que pour cette raison, la bourse de FOCAL vaut jusqu'à la dernière poussière son pesant d'or. Évidemment, et en cela je rejoins le sentiment d'anciens boursiers dont j'ai lu les comptes rendus, je rentre du Nicaragua avec l'insatisfaçante impression de n'en ramener qu'un instantané: j'avais naïvement cru avant mon départ avoir le temps de faire le tour de mon sujet. Je suis rentré début mai, au bout d'un séjour qui a passé trop vite, avec le sentiment de n'avoir en fait qu'amorcer ma recherche. Cela est en bonne partie imputable au zigzags qu'emprunte inévitablement une telle démarche, si bien préparée soit-on. La réalité n'a pas de plan de travail et la pauvreté suit des chemins et obéit à des mécanismes que mes simplifications journalistiques ne m'avaient pas permis d'envisager.

Qu'ai-je donc vu et que m'a-t-on donc appris? Ce poids précieux de réalité concrète en quoi consiste-t-il précisément? Car c'est à ce poids qu'il faut mesurer la valeur et la rentabilité de ma démarche. De cette démarche se sont ultimement dégagées quatre axes principaux que je résume ici le plus schématiquement possible: je me suis vite rendu compte que je ne pourrais décrire la situation des enfants travailleurs (qui n'est pas uniforme: la situation des filles n'est pas celle des garçons, la situation en ville n'est pas celle de la campagne, etc.) sans m'interroger sur les mécanismes mêmes de la pauvreté: sans m'interroger sur les insuffisances du système d'éducation traditionnel, trop rigide pour pouvoir s'adapter à la réalité de ces enfants: sans m'interroger aussi sur le rôle embivalent des ONG: une véritable industrie au Nicaragua qui prennent avec progressisme le relais du système d'éducation mais qui, en même temps, sont objectivement utiles, c'est leur effet pervers, à ce titre la revue Envio, publiée à Managua, m'a été d'un très précieux secours sur les mécanismes de l'indifférence sociale de ce gouvernement qui, dans l'application brutale pour la majorité de la population de mesures d'ajustement macro économiques, obéit à une obsession idéologique: le mot n'est pas trop fort: qui lui fait vouloir effacer toute trace du passé sandiniste. Ce passé sandiniste- l'énergie avec laquelle les alémanistes plus ou moins somozistes s'appliquent à l'effacer en le salissant vs celle avec laquelle la vieille garde racornie et embourgeoisée du FSLN défend ses privilèges- donne au Nicaragua actuel une couleur très particulière. Le Nicaragua constitue, par cette couleur, un cas d'espèce tout en étant par son extrême dénuement, un cas représentatif des pays pauvres de la planète. Au moment où je m'y trouvais, le Nicaragua était incidemment sur le point d'être admis au sein du groupe des 41 pays les plus endettés du monde. Et le gouvernement Aleman s'en félicitait dans la mesure où cela allait, sans réduire sa dette comme telle, faciliter les conditions de son remboursement.

Les invisibles

D'abord, très rapidement, quelques chiffres: à l'échelle planétaire, on évalue le nombre d'enfants travailleurs à 250 millions. En Amérique centrale (moins le Bélice, allez savoir pourquoi), ils sont 1.3 million enfants de moins de 18 ans à travailler. Et ils seraient entre 350,000 et 400,000 au Nicaragua (c'est presque un Nicaraguayan sur quatre). Un peu plus de la moitié des quatre
millions de Nicaraguayens ont moins de 18 ans et un million d'enfants en âge de fréquenter l'école primaire ne la fréquentent pas. Je n’insiste pas sur les statistiques qui demeurent imprécises (par exemple, on mesure le phénomène en fonction de tranches d'âge qui varient d'une évaluation à l'autre) malgré la somme astronomique d'études faites à ce sujet, notamment par l'UNICEF et Redd Barna (Save the Children-Norway) et dont je joins en annexe des copies. Ces statistiques sont néanmoins la preuve d'un phénomène majeur qui ne cesse de prendre de l'ampleur. Les enfants sont de plus en plus nombreux à travailler et ils vont travailler de plus en plus jeune que ce soit sur le marché formel ou informel, et on les retrouve pratiquant de petits métiers de crève-faim dans tous les secteurs de l'économie nicaraguayenne. Ils pullulent dans les rues des villes, évidemment, où ils sont les plus visibles (à Managua surtout mais partout ailleurs aussi). Ils sont, souvent employés par leur mère, des vendeurs ambulants de tortillas, de chicklets et de billets de loterie. Mais ceux-là forment en fait la pointe de l'iceberg du phénomène des enfants travailleurs, puisque la grande majorité d'entre eux (les "invisibles" dont la situation est beaucoup moins documentée) sont "enterrés" en milieu rural: ils travaillent sur la petite ferme familiale ou dans l'agro-alimentaire destiné à l'exportation (c'est le café dans la région de Matagalpa: la canne à sucre dans la région de Chinandega: les produits de la mer sur la côte de l'Atlantique ou le trafic de la drogue est par ailleurs florissant: et c'est le tabac dans le pentagone formé par les villes d'Ocotal, Jalapa, Condega, Pueblo Nuevo et Somoto, au nord du pays, à la frontière du Honduras). Ces invisibles, ce sont aussi les familles qui lavent de petites quantités d'or dans la région minière de Las Minas, au nord, ou se trouvent incidemment d'importantes compagnies canadiennes et que j'ai en partie visitée grâce au concours très utile du Consulat canadien. Ce sont en outre ces enfants, de jeunes filles la plupart du temps, affectés à des tâches domestiques au sein de leur famille ou elles sont, ni plus ni moins, exploitées par leur parents- exploitées eux aussi. Ces Cendrillon parcourront à pied des kilomètres pour aller chercher du bois ou de l'eau, elles sont clouées à la maison pour s'occuper de leurs frères et soeurs. Elles sont les plus invisibles parmi les invisibles.

En 1995, selon un rapport publié par la Banque mondiale, la moitié de la population du pays vivait sous le seuil de la pauvreté. On comprend vite en débarquant à Managua que la situation ne s'est pas améliorée depuis 1995, qu'elle s'est au contraire aggravée. On comprend vite que pour une proportion importante de la population, la seule économie qui soit est une économie de survie et que de cette économie, les enfants - et leurs mères- sont un rouage important. Selon une statistique qui paraît assez bien vérifiée, mais qui fait actuellement l'objet d'études additionnelles de la part d'UNICEF-Nicaragua et du FONIF (le Fonds nicaraguayen pour l'enfance et la famille), un enfant qui travaille contribue jusqu'à 20% du revenu familial. Selon d'autres chiffres gouvernementaux, les enfants qui travaillent sont, dans 30% des cas, l'unique source de revenu familial.

**Culture de pauvreté et "expulsion" scolaire**

Parenthèse sur l'argument de la "culture de pauvreté", que l'on m'a beaucoup asséné dans certaines ONG comme chez les fonctionnaires du ministère de l'Éducation, pour expliquer les mécanismes de reproduction de la pauvreté au Nicaragua. Le problème avec cet argument fallacieux, c'est qu'il fait prendre trop souvent le résultat pour la cause. Parlant de culture de pauvreté, on fait généralement référence à l'ignorance, perpétuée de génération en génération, qui fait en sorte qu'un parent ne voit pas l'utilité d'envoyer ses enfants à l'école. Comme si cette
ignorance constituait une force d'inertie intrinsèque. On s'en sert aussi dans le domaine de la santé: on attribuera commodément une épidémie de la fièvre dengue à la méconnaissance des règles d'hygiène élémentaires, alors qu'objectivement elle tient à l'inadéquation du réseau d'aqueduc et à la déforestation massive du territoire. Le gouvernement Aleman aime bien jouer sur l'argument de la culture de pauvreté pour pouvoir laisser entendre que les parents dont les enfants travaillent sont des gens qui ne prennent pas leurs responsabilités familiales. Il joue sur des clichés et des simplifications pour pouvoir masquer son désengagement social. Il impute à des causes individuelles des culpabilités qui sont historiques, collectives et gouvernementales. Ces bêtises sont efficacement colportées par la petite élite économique nicaraguayenne, encore largement installée à Miami, et par sa balbutiante classe moyenne. Elles confèrent, sur le plan psycho-social, un statut d'inhumanité aux démunis. Au Nicaragua existe un apartheid social; la pauvreté est une saleté qui mendie aux portes des supermarchés climatisés, pleins à craquer de produits d'importation. Le Nicaragua est castéiste, mais il n'y a que deux castes.

Prenons l'accès à l'école élémentaire qui, quoiqu'en disent les autorités n'est gratuite que sur papier. Le principe de l'utilisateur-payeur a commencé à s'appliquer sous l'ancien gouvernement de la présidente Violeta Chamorro et son application s'accentue sous le nouveau gouvernement Aleman. Aux minuscules bureaux du ministère de l'Éducation à Managua, la directrice de l'éducation primaire. Mme Glenda Marcia Reyes, m'a juré que la contribution mensuelle de dix cordobas (1$US) demandée aux parents en frais scolaires était strictement volontaire. Que les parents qui ne pouvaient payer n'avaient pas à le faire. Que les directeurs d'école qui en faisaient une contribution obligatoire agissaient illégalement.

Je n'ai pas de raison de douter de la bonne foi de Mme Reyes, qui travaille dans des conditions difficiles, avec des budgets qui rapetissent et des profs qui gagnent un salaire de misère de 40US$ par mois. Mais sur le terrain, on m'a dit et redit que les parents étaient en fait tenus de payer. Que si un parent sautait un mois, les pressions étaient fortes le mois suivant pour qu'il apporte sa contribution. A ces frais s'en ajoutent d'autres: les enfants doivent porter l'uniforme pour aller à l'école; doivent payer pour faire leurs examens (uncordoba l'examen), sans quoi on leur interdit de les subir et donc de passer à la classe suivante. À Ocotal, m'a expliqué la maire, il faut également rendre ses manuels scolaires et ses cahiers d'exercice à la fin de l'année scolaire pour obtenir l'autorisation de poursuivre ses études. L'incapacité de payer "et même la peur pour un parent de ne pas être en mesure de payer" font en sorte que le système scolaire "expulse" de l'école des milliers d'enfants, m'a expliqué en entrevue Juan Arrien, représentant de l'UNESCO à Managua et responsable du Programme de promotion de la réforme éducative en Amérique latine (PREAL), qui est rattaché à la UCA (Université centro-américaine). Dans ce contexte, les ONG qui viennent en aide aux enfants sont très nombreuses à aider les parents à payer les frais de cette fausse gratuité. Prenez le relais d'un système scolaire mésadapté, trop rigide pour tenir compte de la réalité des enfants qui travaillent, elles sont également très nombreuses à mettre sur pied des "écoles" parallèles qui, par exemple, permettent aux enfants de travailler le matin et d'étudier l'après-midi. Au grand dam de Mme Reyes qui, tout en reconnaissant la rigidité du système traditionnel, estime que les ONG ont trop d'autonomie. Peut-être, mais à s'appuyer massivement sur l'aide étrangère pour pallier sa désertion sociale, le gouvernement ne fait en vérité que récolter les fruits de son approche.

Si bien qu'en amont de cette culture de pauvreté, que l'on montre à mon avis un peu trop
facilement du doigt, il y a l'injustice économique et l'urgence pour la moitié des Nicaraguayens
d'assurer sa simple survie. Ce qui n'exclut pas qu'en aval, ces impératifs donnent lieu à des
monstruosités sociales: ce sont ces pères qui envoient leurs enfants travailler pour subventionner
leur alcoolisme (combien de fois l'ai-je entendu dire?), c'est cette violence familiale et conjugale
qui monte en flèche, c'est la criminalité de rue (comme dans le Mercado Oriental) qui fait que la
délinquance, le vol, la prostitution sont devenus, blaguent les cyniques, des moteurs essentiels de
l'économie du pays.

J'ai vu à l'oeuvre cette économie de survie en visitant des quartiers de Managua (je pense en
particulier au millier de familles qui récupèrent le papier dans le dépotoir municipal), la région de
Las Minas, la région productrice du tabac (à Ocotal et Condega). J'en ai aussi compris certains
des ressorts en visitant notamment la Maison des enfants travailleurs de Dario, située sur la route
de Matagalpa.

**Survivre, d'Ocotal à Dario**

L'interdiction légal du travail pour les moins de 14 ans est largement bafouée dans la région du
tabac ou les enfants constituent, dans le seul département de Nueva Segovia, la moitié de la
main-d'oeuvre. La loi est facile à contourner puisque les fonctionnaires ne quittent pas
Managua. Ils n'en ont tout simplement pas les moyens, ce qui fait que la région du tabac comme
l'est le milieu rural dans son ensemble, est un no man's land du droit ou les proprios nicas des
plantations et les proprios cubano-américains des fabriques de cigares font à peu près tout ce
qu'ils veulent. Seuls leur résistent quelques politiciens locaux, comme la mairesse d'Ocotal,
Martha Adriana, et des ONG nationales comme l'INPRHU, l'une des plus anciennes du pays,
créée dans la foulée du renversement électoral des sandinistes en 1990.

Captive d'une zone de monoculture, la main-d'oeuvre compose. La pauvreté est telle, le tissu
social à ce point décomposé et les organisations de défense à ce point éparpillées que les
propriétaires ont beau jeu d'abuser. Les plus bêtes vont jusqu'à prétendre qu'en embauchant des
enfants, ils le font par philanthropie, par charité sociale. Mais la plupart du temps, ils affirment
embaucher des enfants pour la finesse de leurs mains; parce qu'une fois les plats de tabac
parvenus à maturité, les enfants s'agenouillent plus facilement sur le sol pour couper les feuilles
du bas; parce qu'au moment de la récolte, leur petitesse réduit les risques d'endommager les
plats. Ce sont évidemment des prétextes: les enfants sont payés moitié moins cher que les
adultes (sept cordos par jour, parfois même seulement cinq, plutôt que quinze) pour des journées
en principe plus courtes mais qui sont dans les faits souvent de huit heures, comme les adultes.

Ce sont souvent les enfants des travailleurs qui sont embauchés. Les parents sont à leur corps
défendant un rouage de l'exploitation. À leur corps défendant et par course aux revenus. Par
exemple, dans une coop d'Ocotal, quelques employés ont racheté les parts de leurs collègues et
contrôlent maintenant la boîte. Par favoritisme, ces néo-capitalistes embauchent leurs enfants et
les enfants de leurs copains. Normal. Un père qui touche 15 cordos par jour augmente le revenu
familial (la famille compte en général au moins quatre enfants) de 50% si l'un de ses enfants
travaillent. Pourquoi l'enverrait-il à l'école? Les dimensions catastrophiques du chômage font
en sorte qu'il est difficile de convaincre les producteurs de faire attention- et les parents de
penser à l'avenir. Essayez de convaincre une mère dont les gamins ont faim que tout ira mieux
dans trois ou quatre générations si elle fait tout de suite un effort pour envoyer ses enfants à l'école.

C'est de la pauvreté produite à la chaîne. Et c'est une chaîne dont les maillons sont si nombreux que je n'ai pas ici l'espace pour les énumérer tous. J'ajouterai seulement que, dans l'industrie du tabac, la culture en jachère donne lieu à une mobilité de la main-d'œuvre qui contribue à l'invisibilité du phénomène de l'exploitation des enfants; que l'accès au crédit bancaire est si restreint qu'il oblige souvent des petits producteurs familiaux, étranglés financièrement, à vendre leur récolte prématurément et donc à rabais; que les travailleurs des plantations et des fabriques se lavent les mains avant de manger dans des barils qui ont contenu des insecticides "qui peuvent tuer un chien en trois minutes", m'a dit le maire de Condega.

Cette exploitation à la chaîne, elle est partout au Nica, décuplée par la descente aux enfers de l'économie. Come à Dario, l'une des villes les plus pauvres du pays. Tôt le matin, des enfants font des kilomètres pour aller chercher du bois- les collines sont de plus en plus chauves- rentrent en ville pour le vendre et retournent à la maison donner à maman l'argent qu'ils ont gagnés. Pour certains d'entre eux, cette contribution quotidienne de 20 cordos est obligatoire, sans quoi ils n'auront rien à manger. On imagine la détresse des enfants soumis à ce régime, on imagine aussi celle qui pousse les parents à agir ainsi.

**La pauvreté acceptable**

Et pourtant la pauvreté est si répandue qu'elle s'en trouve banalisée. On voit cette banalisation à l'opinion de plus en plus admise que le travail des enfants est une chose normale, qu'il faut en éliminer les formes "les plus intolérables", comme dit l'Organisation internationale du travail réunie ces semaines-ci à Genève, mais que son éradication complète est utopique. Les scrupules moraux face au travail des enfants ont ainsi tendance à s'amenuiser.

Vrai que le travail est facteur de responsabilisation et que nous avons ici, au Nord, une conception abusivement ouatée de l'enfance. L'étude réalisée par Redd Barna (dont j'ai précédemment mentionné l'existence) parvient à la conclusion que la majorité des enfants qui travaillent jugent utile, importante et valorisante leur contribution au revenue familial; qu'ils veulent continuer de travailler même s'ils fréquentent l'école. Mais je me méfie de ces conclusions: je ne peux m'empêcher de soupçonner ces enfants d'avoir dit ce que les adultes disent. Depuis quand, du reste, les enfants affirment-ils spontanément aimer l'école? L'enfance est peut-être ici trop longue, mais il est clair en revanche que là-bas, les enfants se la font trop souvent voler. Le monde adulte entre dans leur vie par effraction. Le fait est que, tout "responsabilisant" qu'il soit le travail des enfants n'est pas le produit d'une évolution positive de la société, il est le produit direct d'une détérioration catastrophique des conditions sociales. En valorisant le travail comme facteur de responsabilisation de l'enfance, on regarde les choses par le petit bout de la lorgnette.

Les Nicaraguayens sont jeunes, très jeunes. Ceux qui atteignent aujourd'hui la majorité sont nés en 1980, tout de suite après le renversement d'Anastacio Somoza. Ils sont jeunes, mais en leur âme et conscience ils sont déjà bien vieux. Partout au Nicaragua, on entend les gens dire qu'à tout prendre, ils préféreraient «mourir de faim que d'avoir à revivre la guerre [des années 80]». 
La paix est à ce prix: c'est une blessure profonde dans la conscience nationale que le gouvernement Allemand n'hésite pas à exploiter. Sur cette blessure vive, sur les cendres de la guerre et d'un sandinisme qui a viré à l'autoritarisme, se reconstitue à pas de tortue la société civile, soutenue par l'effort très éparpillé de 800 ONG et associations locales qui sont à leur tour soutenues par des gouvernements étrangers et une centaine d'ONG internationales. Leurs efforts ne sont pas exempts d'ambiguïté, mais ils n'en sont pas moins essentiels. Le travail de ces ONG, largement portées par des femmes - le Nicaragua est le lieu d'une tragique démission masculine -, constitue pour le moment le principal rempart contre la grossièreté des méthodes néolibérales et le sacrifice de générations d'enfants.

The Role of Religion in Cuba

by David Swick

Project Description

Religious freedom, for most Canadians, is a simple fact. You choose a church, a temple, or synagogue or you don't. You observe your family's traditional feast days, ceremonies, and oaths or not. All of the power of the state supports your right to choose. Religious freedom seems practically God-given.

In Cuba, things are not so simple. A curious religious history took a turn for the surreal with the ascension to power of Fidel Castro in 1959. In the past four decades relations between the Communist government and religious believers have varied from mutual respect to mutual antagonism.

That much, I knew from reading. But I wanted to go to Cuba to find out what books too rarely reveal. What is life really like for religious believers on the island? I wanted to hear how both Cuban community leaders and ordinary folks feel and think about religion in their lives, and in their society.

I conducted more than 25 interviews on audio tape, and that many again off-tape. As - well, conversations with people on the street - peanut sellers, streetsweepers, restauranteurs often provided valuable insights into the kind of questions I should ask their leaders. My theory for this kind of project, where you land in a place for a set amount of time, is to talk to everyone: all classes, neighbourhoods, races, etc.

Often interviewees provided memorable, thought-provoking conversation. Seminary president Ofelia Ortega stressed that even in its anti-church days, the Communist Party in many ways acted as moral force in society. Presbyterian minister Rene Castellanos, 83, believes that despite the hardships of life in Cuba, Christians there have a responsibility of hope. Baptist NGO chief and parliamentary deputy Raul Suarez argued that Cuba's electoral system is more fair than
Canada's and said he has prayed with President Fidel Castro.

I talked with people who are both Christians and Communist Party members, drank home made run as part of a Palero ceremony, and followed through on a santera's instructions, on a particular feast day, to wash myself with a piece of bread. I worked hard, had a good time, and learned a great deal. Many of my findings will be heard in an upcoming CBC Radio Ideas program, Faith In Cuba.

Most of the taped interviews were with community leaders; most of the noted interviews with community members. I interviewed:
-  Raul Suarez, Baptist minister, head of Martin Luther King Centre NGO, former head of Cuban Council of Churches, and elected member of the National Assembly.
-  The Catholic Archbishop of Santiago
-  Ofelia Ortega, first woman ever ordained a Presbyterian minister in Cuba, former World Council of Churches executive in Geneva, and now director of Cuba's only ecumenical seminary.
-  Nigerian ambassador and devout Muslim Yahiyah Al-Hassan
-  Jose Levy, president of the country's only Saphardic Jewish synagogue
-  Rene Castellanos, 83-years-old professor, minister, and dean of Cuban Presbyterians
-  Havana Vieja babalao (Santeria priest) Carlos Siana
-  Banes Quaker minister Heredio Santos Balmareda
-  Palero (Palo priest) Antonio Abelardo Larduet
-  Spiritualist researcher and author Jose Millet
-  Santeria researcher and author Julian Mateo
-  Enrique Lopez Oliva, University of Havana religion prof
-  Film-maker Felix de la Nuez, whose films include one on Cuba, a patron saint, the Virgin of Caridad.

As well, I attended several important religious ceremonies. They included:

- A Palermo ceremony in which the priest was possessed by a 288-year-old African spirit.
- A Santeria ceremony in which an initiate stays in one room for seven days and seven nights.
- Easter Sunday mass in the national Catholic cathedral in Havana
- A Sabbath service in a Havana synagogue.

Sixty per cent of my three months in Cuba was spent in Havana, and I made several trips outside the capital. Ten days were spent in eastern Santiago de Cuba province, nearly a week in eastern Holguin province, nearly a week in central Matanzas province, and a few days in western Pinar del Rio.

Religion in Cuba - "with its unique history and ongoing tensions between government and religious" - is fascinating in itself, but there was another idea behind this project. It is this: if we hope to understand Cuba at this time of astonishing potential, we will have to comprehend its complicated faith.

Through the past four decades other Latin American countries have worked to create positive
feelings between church and state, and fumbled with various guises of democracy. Cuba has had no such qualms. It took some ideas from Jose Marti, some from the Soviet Union, and a lot from Fidel Castro to come up with its own version of modern society. Cuba is not a democracy, and until recently religious belief had no official place.

Yet the times they are a-changing, and someday soon Cuba will have to choose its place in the 21st century. Fidelismo is no longer an option. In economic terms, the post-Castro era has already begun. The Cuban economy collapsed in 1993; its government has since moved to legalize elements of private enterprise, and accept more foreign investment. Yet a wholesale, immediate acceptance of capitalism is impossible. The hemisphere's only communist country-infamous for industriousness and pride-could veer off in any number of directions.

Will Cuba bring its insights and resources to share with fellow nations, or will it take one step forward and two steps back? Will this nation of 11 million become a hemispheric star, or a regional problem child?

The answers depend in part on how well Cuba is understood by its neighbours. Religion in Cuba is not a simple story, nor is it black-and-white. It involves shades of meaning-it is a complicated truth. There is so much confusion: how can we possibly understand each other? The best place to start is with basic beliefs.

**Project Summary**

Cubans are spiritual people, but are not religious in a way most Canadians would recognize. For starters, few Cubans are only Catholic, or only Santeria, or only Baptist. The great majority sample from the nation, a diverse religious smorgasbord; they mix and match their beliefs. So you meet a black mason who baptizes his children Catholic and attends both Catholic and Santeria rituals. Or a Communist Party member who professes atheism but makes an annual pilgrimage to please San Lazaro (a saint unknown in North America but revered by virtually all Cubans). Over and over I was told "I am not a fanatic". In Cuban parlance this means, "I don't limit myself to one religious expression."

There are historic reasons for this. Unlike most other Latin American countries, Cuba was never overwhelmingly Catholic. The Church in Cuba traditionally supported the Spanish throne and, in this century, a succession of corrupt governments. Only rarely did it attempt to care for the masses.

So the masses were left to establish their own customs and traditions. The black majority combined ancient beliefs and Catholicism; poor Spanish descendants kept up symbolic ties with the Church. Today, the most widespread faiths are two Afro-Cuban belief systems: Santeria and Espiritismo. Neither has official churches - the people pray and conduct ceremonies in their houses. Millions of Cubans know little or nothing of "organized religion". The booklet printed for the Pope's January masses included a page with two messages defining what the mass is.

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker (The Color Purple) once said of Cuba: "Ironically, in a place where there was very little church, I felt the most God."
While black Cubans have for centuries prayed mostly at home, this house phenomenon is now extending to religions of non-African origin, too. In the past few years, in response to a lack of petrol, more than 3,000 Protestant and Catholic groups have been meeting in what they call "Church house. And in Santa Clara the Jewish community is not large enough for a temple, and meets every sabbath in house.

Faith and practice in Cuba, again, bears little resemblance to that in Canada. Most Cubans believe in spirits, and that these spirits are involved in human life. Most Cubans keep religious statues in their homes, and /or fruits behind the door, and/or glasses of water under the bed, and/or wear amulets, and/or pray to the dead. Official statistics are not kept, but it's likely that Cubans regularly lighting candles to communicate with dead ancestors outnumber those going to church.

Religious faith in Cuba is rarely just theory or merely belief - it is practical, hands-on, a part of daily life. Government officials acknowledge that 85 per cent of Cubans have some religious faith and practice. This despite 40 years of government attitude ranging from indifference to discrimination.

This history of relations between the Communist government and religious groups is fascinating and unfortunate. For 30 years, until 1992, the party did not allow believers of any kind as party members, forcing believers to accept second-class status, or be dishonest and secretive.

The Jehovah's Witnesses suffered the most, and continue to be severely restricted. Their refusal to salute the flag and serve in the armed forces (military service in Cuba is mandatory) is perceived by the Communist party as anti-state activity.

The government is now treating almost all religions better; with a mixture of trepidation and respect. Some Cubans say this is Fidel's old Jesuit teaching coming through at last. More say it is sheer pragmatism. Religious organizations now offer a full range of social services the government can no longer afford to provide. Plus, Cuban churches last year, through international connections, brought $80 million into the country.

Religion in Cuba is rarely a habit. Believers of all kinds have had to pay dearly for their faith; it's not something one takes lightly. In the last few years, however, the country's economic crisis has led to a moral crisis, which has led to a drive for peace and truth. All faiths report great growth. Many newcomers, however, on discovering what religion is, what is expected of them, and what they may receive in return - leave almost as suddenly as they arrive. It's not yet clear how much Cuba will be permanently changed.